

Great Ming 551

Chapter 551 Pressing On

The silt pulled from the riverbed was not wasted.

Dao Xuan Tianzun—being neither wasteful nor sentimental—scooped it up and dumped it neatly along both banks. The wet, heavy mud spread out in long, dark ribbons beside the Fen River.

Once it dried, it would become prime alluvial soil.

The kind farmers would fight over.

The kind villages would quietly annex at night.

Future disputes were already forming, but that was tomorrow's problem.

Inside the box, Xing Honglang and her group stood rooted in place, staring at the sky like a flock of stunned pigeons.

The shovel didn't stop.

It wasn't a single dramatic scoop meant to impress believers. It kept moving—methodical, relentless—digging forward along the riverbed, scoop after scoop, as if performing a long-overdue surgery.

Mud flew.

The river widened.

The bottom dropped lower and lower.

This was the junction of the Fen River and the Yellow River.

And nature, seeing an opening, wasted no time.

As the Fen River's bed deepened, its water level dipped—only to be immediately filled by the Yellow River's far more arrogant volume. Brown water surged backward into the Fen River, rushing upstream like an impatient guest who had been waiting outside too long.

The river that had once been barely twenty meters wide swelled to forty.

Depth followed.

Enough for cargo ships.

Enough for history to restart.

For a few breaths, no one spoke.

Then realization hit.

"...Ah," Xing Honglang said slowly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is... making the river navigable."

Old Nanfeng scratched his head. "Didn't I just say it couldn't be done?"

Zao Ying snorted. "You think Dao Xuan Tianzun descended from the heavens just to slap you in the face?"

"...When you put it like that," Old Nanfeng said sheepishly, "I suddenly feel less important."

The shovel continued upstream, gradually shrinking from view before disappearing entirely beyond the bend.

The Fen River, meanwhile, behaved strangely.

For a time, it flowed backward.

Yellow River water surged in so fiercely that it overwhelmed the Fen's original current. Only after a long while did the flow stabilize, finding a new balance.

Inside his apartment, Li Daoxuan leaned back and exhaled.

Even scaled down two hundred times, the Fen River was still absurdly long.

After digging more than ten kilometers, his arm was sore.

"Yeah, no," he muttered. "That's enough godhood for today."

He wasn't in a rush.

The river couldn't be fixed in a single day—and neither could history. Besides, his vision hadn't expanded to Pingyang Prefecture yet. Digging too fast would risk the Yellow River flooding upstream areas.

Ten kilometers a day.

Slow. Controlled.

Responsible god behavior.

But even this partial effort was enough.

From the river's confluence to Hejin County, the channel was now wide and deep enough for medium cargo vessels.

Inside the box, Xing Honglang pointed ahead at Hejin County's crumbling silhouette.

"Once ships can reach here," she said, smiling, "this county will stop looking like it's waiting to die."

Everyone nodded.

They looked up instinctively.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was gone.

But awe lingered like thunder after lightning.

That was when Old Nanfeng frowned.

"...This rain is a problem."

Everyone turned.

"In this weather," he continued, "our flintlocks are basically decorative sticks. If we run into bandits now, it's blades against blades. Numbers matter again."

Silence.

Then—

"Damn it!"

"Find shelter!"

"Into Hejin County—now!"

Pingyang Prefecture

The rain did not discriminate.

It fell on rebels and civilians alike.

And it fell precisely when Fan Shan Yao returned.

The handsome bandit leader stared at the rain-slicked walls of Pingyang Prefecture, lips curling into a confident smile.

"Rain," he said softly. "Perfect."

Last time, Wang Xiaohua's flintlocks had torn his men apart.

But rain ruined gunpowder.

Rain loved bandits.

Unfortunately for him, Pingyang Prefecture was not an open field.

It was a city.

And cities had people.

At Dou Wenda's command, the citizens moved like ants kicked into fury.

Oiled-paper umbrellas appeared.

Tarps were dragged up.

Wooden frames were hammered together in frantic bursts of inspiration.

Some lunatic even carried an entire shed onto the wall.

In minutes, the ramparts resembled a marketplace of umbrellas and improvised roofs.

Two hundred flintlock soldiers stood beneath them.

They fired.

Fan Shan Yao's smile vanished.

Bandits screamed and fell.

A few madmen charged the walls—only to be greeted by Wang Er, who hurled a stone the size of a watermelon straight down.

Crack.

The man collapsed without even the dignity of a scream.

Villagers joined in, raining stones with religious enthusiasm.

Fan Shan Yao retreated again.

"We won!"

"The rain helped us!"

"We can farm again!"

While the people cheered, Dou Wenda did not.

He grabbed Wang Xiaohua's arm. "Commander—how much ammunition remains?"

Wang Xiaohua shook his head. "After this? Not much."

Dou Wenda's face tightened. "Without firearms, Pingyang Prefecture falls."

Wang Xiaohua smiled faintly. "Relax. Reinforcements are coming."

Dou Wenda glanced at the rain. "...In this weather?"

Forty Li Away

Chezhuang.

Cheng Xu stood beneath the rain, watching water stream off his helmet.

Forty li remained.

Close enough to smell danger.

Too close to relax.

Rain crippled firearms.

Grenades were useless.

Flintlocks were unreliable.

Cheng Xu sighed. "If we run into bandits now, I have an eighty percent chance of meeting my great-grandmother."

A captain stepped forward. "Sir. The Chassepot rifles are unaffected by rain."

Cheng Xu blinked.

Then grinned.

"...Right. I knew that."

He raised his hand.

"Advance."

"Press on!"

Chapter 552 Reinforcements Have Arrived

Outside Pingyang Prefecture, at Gao Jie's main camp, the sky finally decided to remember it still existed.

After years of drought, the rain didn't drizzle politely or knock first. It arrived like an offended creditor—loud, relentless, and determined to soak everyone involved.

Gao Jie hadn't expected it. Neither had anyone else.

His camp, built for dust and wind, folded instantly before water. Canvas sagged. Fires died. Boots turned into portable ponds. From the highest officer to the lowest foot soldier, everyone was soaked so thoroughly that even their bones felt damp.

Fortunately, Gao Jie didn't command flintlock riflemen.

Which meant the rain wasn't a problem—just a mild inconvenience accompanied by wet socks and moral superiority.

Rainwater plastered his hair to his face, sharpening his features instead of ruining them. If Gao Jie had already been outrageously handsome before, now—standing there in the rain like a tragic painting—he looked like a man born specifically to make others feel bad about their faces.

Three hundred percent more dashing than the average man?

Please.

At least thirty-two hundred.

If some foreigner had stumbled upon this scene, they would've slapped him with a name like Vischmo Namoshuai, the Dashing and Irresistible, and written poems about it later.

Gao Jie enjoyed the effect.

His posture straightened. His voice rose.

"Gentlemen," he declared, rain running down his jaw with dramatic timing, "we've failed to take Pingyang Prefecture twice."

The bandits from Mizhi leaned in, ears perked.

"But the third time," Gao Jie continued, smiling, "victory is guaranteed."

The men blinked.

"Chief," one finally asked, "why?"

Gao Jie chuckled, the sound rich with confidence. "Because their flintlock rifles are almost out of ammunition."

The reaction was immediate.

"How do you know that?"

Gao Jie lifted a finger, patient, indulgent—like a teacher explaining something obvious. "In the last battle, their rifle fire wasn't nearly as fierce as before. They only fired when absolutely necessary. That tells you everything."

He paced slowly, rain splashing beneath his boots.

"During the first assault, our morale shattered before we even reached the walls. Rifle fire everywhere. But the second time? We made it all the way to the base of the walls."

He stopped, eyes sharp.

"That only happens when they're afraid to pull the trigger."

The bandits exchanged looks.

...He wasn't wrong.

One of them laughed nervously. "The Chief really is the Chief."

Gao Jie smiled wider. "If our courage hadn't failed us at the last moment, Pingyang would already belong to us."

He spread his arms, as if embracing the city itself.

"Pingyang is a prefectural city. Grain, silver, women, weapons—everything we've been starving for is inside."

The bandits roared. "Take Pingyang!"

Gao Jie laughed, rain or not, utterly pleased. "You've all rested. Morale is back. Launch another assault."

"This time," he said calmly, "we finish it."

"Awoo!"

The cry rose like a wave.

Thus began Gao Jie's third assault on Pingyang Prefecture.

Tens of thousands of men surged forward, filling the land like a living flood.

The rain kept falling.

And it did not care who it soaked.

In the downpour, the bandits looked ferocious—mud-smearred, eyes blazing, teeth bared. This weather ruined bows, crippled firearms, and turned clever tactics into suggestions.

Which was exactly why it favored them.

When your weapons are worse than your enemy's, the best strategy is simple: drag everyone into the mud and call it fairness.

Inside Pingyang Prefecture, tension spread faster than the rain.

Dou Wenda wiped his face, uncertain whether it was sweat or water. He didn't bother checking.

Commander Bai Mao's men were almost out of ammunition. Some soldiers had one shot left. Some had two. Some had flintlocks that might not fire even if begged.

Misfires were no longer accidents—they were expectations.

If the city fell, others might flee through side gates.

Dou Wenda could not.

A prefect dies with his city. That was the rule.

And if he forgot it, the Emperor would remind him.

His gaze turned to Bai Mao.

Bai Mao felt the weight too, his jaw tight, breath shallow.

Only Wang Er looked calm.

Grim, but steady.

"Don't panic," Wang Er said. "Half of these riflemen are from Wangjia Village. We once crossed a thousand li as rebels. Even without guns, we still know how to kill."

Bai Mao swallowed. "Mm."

Wang Er drew his broadsword. "Fix bayonets."

The Wangjia Village men roared back. "Awoo!"

"Believe in yourselves," Wang Er said. "And believe in Gao Family Village. Reinforcements are coming."

He raised his blade.

"They won't abandon us."

Outside, Gao Jie roared his command.

War drums thundered, harsh and wild in the rain.

The bandits charged.

"Fire!"

The city answered with its last bullets.

Men fell.

Then—silence.

The bandits laughed.

"They're empty!"

They hit the walls.

Ladders slammed into stone.

"Fix bayonets!" Wang Er bellowed.

Steel clicked onto muzzles.

A bandit climbed, swung—

And was skewered mid-motion, screaming as he fell.

More came.

Too many.

Wang Er carved a path through blood and rain, blade rising and falling. Bai Mao fought beside him, slower, rougher, already breathing hard.

This was where true leaders showed themselves.

Gao Jie watched from below, grinning.

"Pingyang is ours!"

Then—

A shout.

"Chief! An army from the south!"

Two thousand men.

No banners.

Masked commander.

Every one of them carrying a flintlock rifle.

Gao Jie laughed.

"Two thousand riflemen in this rain?" he scoffed. "Send ten thousand men. Take their guns."

He waved it off, amused.

"Heaven truly favors me."

From the south, the reinforcements marched faster.

And the rain kept falling—

utterly indifferent to Gao Jie's confidence.

Chapter 553: Pacified Rebels

Gao Jie looked at the two thousand newly arrived arquebusiers and felt... oddly relaxed.

Not relieved. Not reassured.

Relaxed.

They were only two thousand, after all.

Across from him, Cheng Xu looked at the ten thousand rebel soldiers charging his way and felt exactly the same.

When both sides believed the pressure had somehow skipped them, the universe usually took that as a personal insult.

Perhaps this was the moment for a little optimism. The reckless kind. The kind that gets people buried.

"Rifled arquebusiers! Grenadiers!" Cheng Xu's voice cut through the rain.

"Fix bayonets!"

The downpour hammered the earth so loudly it threatened to swallow his words. Fortunately, no army worth anything relied on a single man shouting himself hoarse. Orders rippled outward—captains echoed, squad leaders relayed, boots shifted, metal answered metal.

Fifteen hundred soldiers snapped bayonets onto their barrels in crisp unison.

The remaining five hundred did something else entirely.

They hunched slightly, bodies angled, bamboo hats tilted just so. Jackets opened briefly. Paper cartridges emerged—dry, intact, unbothered by the weather's opinions.

Chassepot rifles were built with sealed breeches and rubber fittings.

If they could keep air out, rain didn't even qualify as an inconvenience.

The riflemen finished loading and lifted their weapons, watching the oncoming rebels with expressions usually reserved for livestock wandering into the wrong pen.

On Cheng Xu's chest, the golden embroidery of Dao Xuan Tianzun curved faintly—whether from rain, light, or narrative judgment, it almost looked like it was smiling.

Li Daoxuan watched as well.

The soldiers saw targets.

He saw something else entirely.

It felt like opening a strategy game and realizing your tech tree had quietly sprinted ahead while the enemy was still arguing about which stick hit harder.

Arquebusiers versus swordsmen.

It wasn't even unfair.

It was educational.

The rebel army crossed into five hundred meters.

Too far for arrows. Too far for courage to warm up. Too far for shouting slogans to mean anything.

But for breech-loading rifles?

Oh.

"They're in range," Cheng Xu said calmly.

"Free fire."

No formations. No volleys. No synchronized shouting.

Just aim.

Trigger.

Bang.

A rebel fell, legs folding like he'd forgotten how they worked.

Then another.

Bang. Bang.

Five hundred rifles spoke in overlapping sentences.

Men collapsed mid-step. Flags dipped. Horses screamed. The front ranks disintegrated before they understood they were supposed to be charging.

Gao Jie's smile froze.

"That far?" he shouted. "That's impossible!"

Several hundred paces away, his men hadn't even started sprinting yet. Cold-weapon charges didn't begin until morale peaked—until blood was hot and lungs were burning.

They were still in the prelude.

Like starting a song and not even reaching the chorus—

And the other side was already singing the funeral verse.

The firing didn't stop.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

No pauses. No visible reloads.

The rain meant nothing.

Distance meant nothing.

Time meant nothing.

Men fell faster than rumors spread.

Panic hit before bravery ever arrived.

This wasn't a battle. It was a demonstration.

The rebels broke.

Not in lines. Not in order.

They turned and ran, crashing into each other, trampling tents, overturning carts. Gao Jie screamed himself hoarse, but no one listened. Fear had already promoted itself to commander.

The collapse rippled backward—straight into the main camp.

At the city walls, rebels who had climbed froze.

Those still on ladders let go.

Those already atop found themselves alone.

And an isolated enemy, as everyone learned sooner or later, was simply meat waiting for knives.

Wang Er didn't waste the lesson.

His saber flashed. Bodies fell. The last stubborn rebels toppled from the wall, rain washing their blood down the stone like an afterthought.

Then laughter—wild, disbelieving.

"Reinforcements!" Dou Wenda shouted from below. "They're incredible! Gao Jie is retreating! He's retreating!"

Wang Er finally had time to look.

Through the rain, an army marched forward in clean order, rifles held steady, steps unhurried.

"Hey!" someone yelled. "Our people are here!"

"Pingyang is safe!"

Cheers rolled across the wall like thunder with better timing.

The gates opened.

Cheng Xu entered the city with his officers. Dou Wenda stepped forward to greet him—and paused.

The man's face was covered.

Before he could ask, Cheng Xu clasped his fists and laughed softly. "An old wound," he said. "Took a blade to the face years ago. Ugly thing. Better for everyone if I keep it hidden."

"Oh!" Dou Wenda waved the concern away instantly. "Scars earned for the nation are marks of honor!"

He didn't believe a word of it. Neither did Cheng Xu.

They moved on.

Now came the delicate part.

Cheng Xu couldn't claim Bai Mao as his superior—no patrol commander fielded two thousand rifles. He couldn't mention Chengcheng County. And Shi Jian's name would only raise more questions.

So he chose truth, trimmed neatly enough to pass inspection.

"This subordinate," he said, "was once known as Old Demon of Guyuan. I joined the Guyuan rebels in my youth, later followed Boss Xing—Xing Honglang—as a minor leader. A few days ago, we accepted amnesty. Hearing Pingyang was under threat, I rushed here immediately. General Xing will arrive soon."

Dou Wenda's smile stiffened.

Pacified rebels.

The most dangerous kind of ally.

Regular officers followed rules. These men followed moods.

Offend them, and yesterday's saviors became tomorrow's problem.

Dou Wenda clasped his fists again, this time a little deeper.

"Then Pingyang Prefecture," he said carefully, "owes you its survival."

Cheng Xu smiled behind his mask.

Somewhere above them, the rain continued falling—

having already chosen its side.

Chapter 554 A Way to Defy the Rain

Dou Wenda was a sensible man.

And a sensible man, when faced with two thousand well-armed soldiers who had recently been rebels and had recently accepted amnesty, knew exactly what to do—

Stay far away.

He busied himself with battlefield cleanup, directing the militia to tend to the wounded, move corpses, and pretend very hard that nothing dangerous had just happened. As long as he was working, he wasn't provoking anyone. As long as he wasn't provoking anyone, he was safe.

Once Dou Wenda tactfully removed himself, the atmosphere immediately relaxed.

Cheng Xu shook the rain off his armor, water splattering everywhere. His face twisted in irritation.

"Damn this weather. Fighting in winter rain—my bones feel like they've been soaked through. Find us somewhere clean. I need dry clothes and a hot bath, or I'll freeze before the enemy ever comes back."

Bai Mao laughed. "You complain like an old man. Come on—barracks aren't far."

Wang Er followed behind, and the three walked together through the rain-slicked streets.

"This rain came fast," Cheng Xu muttered. "No warning at all."

"Shanxi still gets rain," Wang Er replied. "Not like Shaanxi. Over there, the sky looks like it's forgotten what water is."

Cheng Xu nodded, but his brow soon furrowed.

"If this kind of rain becomes common, it'll be trouble. Arquebusiers don't like moisture. Powder hates water even more."

Wang Er's expression grew solemn. "That is a problem."

At that moment, the small puppet sitting on Bai Mao's shoulder let out a soft chuckle.

"Solving it isn't actually that hard."

The three men nearly jumped out of their skins. They turned instantly and bowed.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The Flat Rabbit—Dao Xuan Tianzun in puppet form—waved its round little hand.

"Enough ceremony. Listen carefully. Firearms failing in rain is not a new problem. During Japan's Sengoku period, over a hundred years ago, they found a solution that was cheap, crude, and effective."

All three commanders straightened, faces serious.

"Please instruct us, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"Bring me something to draw with."

They all looked at the puppet's hand.

Round. Plump. Entirely unsuited for holding a brush.

Silence fell.

Dao Xuan Tianzun: "..."

It cleared its throat.

"Then bring a large bowl of ink."

No one dared laugh.

They rushed inside, forgetting entirely about changing clothes, and soon returned with a bowl filled to the brim. Dao Xuan Tianzun plunged its entire spherical hand into the ink, soaked it thoroughly, then pulled it out.

"Excellent."

With that inky hand, it drew a long tube on the floor.

"This is the arquebus."

The three nodded quickly.

Next, it added a square box over the firing mechanism.

"This is a wooden or bamboo casing. It covers the lock. Rain can fall all it wants—your powder stays dry."

The drawing was... abstract. But meaning didn't require beauty.

Cheng Xu's eyes lit up.

"So the soldiers wear wide conical hats. Load under the brim, then seal the lock before firing."

"Precisely," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "Simple things often work best."

Wang Er nodded emphatically. "Crude, but clever."

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled.

"Of course, this is only a temporary fix. If you want to truly ignore rain—upgrade everything to Chassepot rifles."

The three saluted in unison.

"As you command!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun fell silent again, returning to the posture of an ordinary puppet.

Only then did the commanders finally change clothes, warm themselves by the fire, and head back out beneath oil-paper umbrellas.

Pingyang Prefecture was still a mess.

Rain washed blood into the gutters. Laborers dragged corpses away. Others restocked stones and logs atop the walls, preparing for battles that might—or might not—come again.

Dou Wenda was soaked through, still rushing about. When he saw Cheng Xu, the first thing he asked was the only thing that mattered.

"General... your ammunition supply?"

Bai Mao laughed. "Plenty. From now on, that's the least of our worries."

Dou Wenda finally exhaled.

Then Cheng Xu spoke.

"We didn't come just to sit behind walls."

Dou Wenda's heart jumped. "General... you mean—?"

"We go on the offensive."

"What?!" Dou Wenda nearly shouted. "Two thousand men against two hundred thousand? General, bravery is admirable, but this—this is reckless!"

Cheng Xu sneered.

"Wait for imperial troops, and the rebels scatter. Chase them, and they scatter again. Five years of chasing shadows—how many more winters do you want the people to endure?"

Dou Wenda had no answer.

Bai Mao looked toward the rain-soaked sky.

"Heaven gives rain. The people dare to hope again. If the rebels could be pacified this winter..."

It was a beautiful thought.

But Dao Xuan Tianzun, silent and unseen, thought otherwise.

Do you think the drought ends so easily?

This rain is mercy—but mercy is always brief.

Outside, the rain continued.

Three days. Three nights.

The downpour softened into a ceaseless drizzle, wrapping the world in gray mist.

Chasepot rifles could still function. Rifled arquebuses could not.

So Cheng Xu waited.

Trees were cut. Bamboo was split. Rain-boxes were crafted. Conical hats widened until soldiers looked like walking umbrellas.

By the third day, every arquebus was protected.

The rebels did not return.

Instead—

Xing Honglang arrived.

And with him, the real storm began to gather.

Chapter 555 You Take a Trip to Jiangzhou

Xing Honglang arrived at Pingyang Prefecture with another two thousand troops in tow.

With her arrival, Gao Family Village's forces in the region swelled to a respectable four thousand four hundred. Not enough to swallow the rebel horde outright—but more than enough to make people start believing unpleasant things could actually be solved.

Unfortunately, belief did not make the rain stop.

Xing Honglang's unit possessed only two hundred Chassepot rifles, fewer even than Cheng Xu's men. Combined, their modern rifles barely reached seven hundred. The rest were rifle-musket infantry, grenadiers, and a stubborn minority who still trusted steel more than powder.

Standing beneath the unrelenting rain, Xing Honglang shook her head.

"I never expected Shanxi to rain like this," she said frankly. "On the road, it came down all at once. I had to slow the march and skirt rebel territory the whole way. If we'd collided head-on in that weather..."

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to.

Bai Mao, smiling, pulled out a wide bamboo hat and placed it on his head. Then he produced a small bamboo casing and snapped it neatly over his rifle's firing mechanism.

"What about this?" he asked. "Think it's useful?"

Xing Honglang's eyes lit up.

"Oh? That's clever. The lock stays dry."

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun taught us," Bai Mao said casually.

That was all it took.

Xing Honglang nodded decisively. "Then make more. As many as possible."

Orders were immediately sent to Dou Wenda. Artisans were mobilized. Bamboo was split. Before the day ended, rain-hats and rifle covers were already being produced in batches.

While humans busied themselves with war preparations, Li Daoxuan faced a far less glamorous problem.

Dredging.

He had begun at the confluence of the Yellow River and the Fen River, steadily working upstream. At first, the work had been simple—almost soothing. Dig here, widen there, guide the flow, move on.

Then one day, he lifted his shovel—

And stopped.

Ahead, on the north bank of the Fen River, a city appeared.

Jiangzhou.

Later generations would call it Jishan County, but for now, it was very much alive—walls pressed tight against the river, ten or twenty thousand people living their ordinary lives in close proximity to the water.

Fishing boats dotted the river. Nets were cast. Skiffs slipped between currents.

If Li Daoxuan plunged a shovel down here without warning, the result would be predictable.

Panic. Screams. People fleeing from something they could neither see nor comprehend.

Even worse—once dredging began, the river would turn muddy for days. Fish would vanish. Fishermen would lose their livelihoods overnight.

A god could reshape rivers.

But a god who didn't think ahead only created new disasters.

Li Daoxuan sighed and set his tiny shovel aside.

His awareness snapped back to Dragon Gate Ferry, surging into the Titanic form of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Construction at the ferry had stalled. Rain soaked everything. Blue Hats supervised Yellow Hats who now had nothing to supervise except the weather.

Shi Jian was wandering aimlessly, bored out of his mind.

The moment Dao Xuan Tianzun stirred, Shi Jian felt it and hurried over.

"Shi Jian," Dao Xuan Tianzun commanded, "leave a deputy here. Take a small, fast unit and go to Jiangzhou immediately."

Shi Jian blinked, surprised—but did not question it.

"As you command."

Dao Xuan Tianzun withdrew from the massive form and co-sensed directly into the cotton-thread embroidery on Shi Jian's chest.

A Cotton Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Light. Discreet. Unthreatening.

Shi Jian took ten men and rode hard along the north bank of the Fen River, rain lashing their faces.

Midway, Dao Xuan Tianzun finally explained the plan.

Shi Jian listened—and frowned slightly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... Jiangzhou has never seen you. The people don't know of your existence. If a shovel the size of a mountain appears in their river, they'll think the apocalypse has arrived."

"I know," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "That's why you're going."

Shi Jian hesitated. "And how should I persuade them?"

"You were once a scout," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "Use your judgment."

That was both praise and pressure.

Shi Jian straightened. "I will not disappoint."

After dozens of li, Jiangzhou appeared through the rain.

The city gates were shut tight. Archers stood beneath shelters on the walls. The moment Shi Jian's group appeared, bows were drawn.

"Who goes there?!"

Shi Jian laughed.

"Shi Jian, squad commander under Shaanxi Commander-in-Chief Wang Cheng'en. Stationed at Dragon Gate Ferry. You've heard of me."

The name traveled upward.

Soon, the prefect appeared atop the wall.

Qin Changqing.

Rat-like eyes. Thin face. A man whose expression suggested he had never fully trusted anyone—and had often been right.

"I am Qin Changqing, Prefect of Jiangzhou," he called. "What brings Commander Shi here?"

Shi Jian smiled politely.

"Bandits attacked Dragon Gate Ferry days ago. I repelled them. I worry they may turn toward Jiangzhou next, so I came to assess the situation."

Qin Changqing almost dismissed him outright.

Then he reconsidered.

Bandits hadn't come yet. That didn't mean they wouldn't. And local militia alone wouldn't hold if they did.

This military man wanted a relationship.

That could be useful.

Qin Changqing's expression softened instantly.

"This official has long heard of Commander Shi's valor," he said warmly. "A young general of great promise."

He turned and barked, "Open the gates!"

Moments later, Jiangzhou welcomed Shi Jian inside.

As attendants took the horses, Qin Changqing walked beside him, sighing theatrically.

"The bandits north of here are relentless. Puxian besieged. Daning in chaos. This official truly lies awake at night with worry."

Shi Jian listened.

And smiled to himself.

The door was open.

Now it was just a matter of guiding where it led.

Chapter 556 Jiwang Temple

As Shi Jian rode deeper into Jiangzhou City, his eyes never stopped moving.

They slid across rooftops, lingered on street corners, counted guards by instinct. Years of scouting had trained him to read cities the way other men read ledgers—where the pressure points were, where fear collected, where belief quietly took root.

Pinned to his chest, the embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun seemed just as alert.

Thread-stitched eyes tilted left. Then right.

They were looking for the same thing.

A place where faith already lived.

Shi Jian hadn't expected much. Jiangzhou was orderly, wary, and exhausted—three qualities that usually left little room for miracles.

Then both man and deity paused.

Ahead of them rose a temple.

Not a small roadside shrine, nor some half-abandoned hall clinging to relevance, but a proper structure—thick pillars, wide eaves, incense smoke curling steadily into the rain-soaked air as if it had nowhere better to be.

Shi Jian slowed his horse slightly.

"Milord Qin," he asked casually, "what temple is that?"

Qin Changqing glanced over, tone indifferent.

"Jiwang Temple. Built back in the Yuan dynasty. Dedicated to Jiwang. The locals are quite attached to it—always burning incense, always praying."

"Jiwang," Shi Jian repeated.

The name sounded familiar. Familiar enough that he didn't question it.

Inside Li Daoxuan's mind, however, there was a very brief—but very real—pause.

Jiwang?

The silence lasted only a heartbeat, but it was the kind of silence that made one uncomfortable.

Wait. Who?

No matter. This was the twenty-first century. Ignorance lasted exactly as long as one's internet connection.

Li Daoxuan withdrew from the diorama for a fraction of a second, typed two characters into his computer, and stared.

Houji.

Ancestor of Agriculture. God of the Five Grains.

One of the oldest cultural cornerstones still standing.

Li Daoxuan clicked his tongue quietly. I really need to read more.

When he returned to the diorama, Qin Changqing's voice reached him immediately—loud, scoffing, unrestrained.

"What use is worshipping Jiwang?" Qin Changqing sneered. "Ancestor of Agriculture? Hah. When drought comes, where is he then? These idiots kneel until their foreheads bleed, and not a single grain grows. Last year they even dared to delay tax payments. I had to beat a few instigators to death just to get things moving. Nearly ruined my evaluation."

The embroidered eyes of Dao Xuan Tianzun narrowed.

Not theatrically. Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Shi Jian felt the shift instantly. His jaw tightened—but he kept his gaze forward, expression neutral. A soldier learned early which reactions were safe and which would get him killed before the real work even began.

Under his breath, he muttered,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... this one's cut from the same cloth as Zhang Yaocai."

Mm, Li Daoxuan answered softly. Worse tailoring.

They reached the gates of Jiwang Temple.

Inside, the courtyard was packed.

Rain-soaked commoners knelt shoulder to shoulder, filling every open space. Those who couldn't squeeze inside the main hall knelt outside in the mud, backs hunched, palms pressed together.

"Thank you, Jiwang, for the blessed rain!"

"Thank you, Jiwang!"

The sound rolled outward like waves.

Li Daoxuan watched silently.

He didn't believe in gods. Never had. But Houji was not merely a god. He was a memory—of farming, of survival, of people clawing food from stubborn earth long before there were emperors to tax it.

Respect, at least, was deserved.

Qin Changqing snorted.

Then, loudly—far too loudly—he barked,

"Useless lot! Rain falls and you think next year will be easy? Let me make this clear—if you dare delay taxes again, don't blame this official for showing no mercy."

The courtyard went silent.

Commoners turned. Faces drained of color. Knees trembled. Some bowed lower, as if hoping to sink into the ground entirely.

Shi Jian's fingers twitched.

Qin Changqing smiled and turned back to him.

"Captain Shi, no need to trouble yourself with these people. Come. My residence is prepared."

Shi Jian said only,

"Oh."

He followed.

Tea was served. Words were exchanged. Empty phrases drifted like smoke. Qin Changqing eventually excused himself, convinced he'd made a useful connection.

Only after the doors closed did Shi Jian lower his voice.

"I want to kill him," he said flatly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun did not rebuke him.

"He deserves it," Li Daoxuan replied. "But not yet. You've stepped into the court's shadow. Kill him now, and everything collapses."

Shi Jian clenched his fists.

"And the people?"

"They're why we're here."

Silence.

Then—inside Li Daoxuan's mind—two ideas collided.

Not gently.

More like flint striking steel.

"Shi Jian," Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly, "continue as planned. I'll handle the rest."

Li Daoxuan withdrew.

Outside the box, he aimed his camera at the statue of Jiwang and took photographs from every angle. Front. Profile. Rear. Details.

Then he turned to the 3D printer.

Minutes passed.

A four-centimeter Jiwang statue emerged.

He placed it into the box.

"Co-sense."

Nothing.

He stared at it.

Then he smiled.

Back to the printer.

This time, he printed only the face.

A thin, crude mask.

He took out a four-centimeter silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun figure—metal skeleton, realistic proportions. A body meant to move.

He placed the Jiwang face onto it.

The result was... unsettling.

A refined body. An archaic face.

Perfect.

He placed it in an empty valley.

"Co-sense."

The world shifted.

An eight-meter-tall figure stood beneath gray skies. Before him, a withered tree barely reached his waist.

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Ancestor Houji," he murmured, "lend me your name for a moment. I'll return it cleaner than I found it."

Rain continued to fall.

And somewhere in Jiangzhou, faith was about to be redirected—very carefully.

Chapter 557 Jiwang Arrives

Shi Jian was temporarily lodged in a guest room within Qin Changqing's official residence.

The night was deep. Rain drizzled steadily, tapping the earth with the patience of something that knew it had all the time in the world. Jiangzhou slept—at least, that's what it thought.

Suddenly, Shi Jian sat bolt upright.

He dressed without hesitation, slipped out the door, vaulted the courtyard wall, and vanished into the night like a shadow that had grown legs.

His destination was clear.

Jiwang Temple.

By now, the temple was empty. The common folk had long since gone home, and even the Daoist priests were snoring with the serenity of people who firmly believed nothing interesting ever happened after midnight.

Jiwang Temple wasn't guarded. After all, who in their right mind would cause trouble here?

By the dim glow of the ever-burning oil lamp before Jiwang's statue, Shi Jian withdrew a strip of yellow silk from his sleeve. His subordinates had prepared it earlier—writing included.

He tied it neatly to a beam before the statue and let it unfurl.

Bold characters glared out in silence:

"The Magistrate of Jiangzhou—cruel in office, ruthless in taxation, an affront to heaven and earth."

Shi Jian read it once. Then again.

Satisfied, he nodded, chuckled softly, and left.

By the time dawn arrived, he was already back in bed, sleeping like a man who had done nothing at all.

Morning in Jiangzhou felt... noisy.

The air buzzed with voices, excitement, and the unmistakable scent of gossip freshly baked.

Shi Jian stepped into the streets and didn't even need to ask.

"Have you heard? Something appeared in Jiwang Temple!"

"That silk banner—those words were vicious!"

"Whoever did that must have a death wish!"

"But it appeared inside Jiwang Temple..."

"And right in front of Jiwang's statue!"

The tone shifted.

Slowly.

Dangerously.

"Well... who would dare hang something there?"

"Exactly."

"If no human would dare—then who did?"

The conclusion arrived like a badly reasoned but emotionally satisfying answer.

"It was Jiwang."

"A divine decree!"

"Last night, Jiwang himself descended!"

"Daoist Zheng saw it with his own eyes while relieving himself!"

Shi Jian nearly choked.

Nearby, Dao Xuan Tianzun—observing through the small avatar Shi Jian carried—let out a quiet, helpless sigh.

"So it begins," he muttered. "One retelling: acceptable. Two: exaggerated. Three: completely divorced from reality."

Unfortunately for Qin Changqing, the rumors wouldn't survive long enough to reach a fourth round.

Qin Changqing arrived at Jiwang Temple in a fury, dragging yamen runners behind him like accessories to his bad decisions.

He stopped before the silk banner.

"Tear it down!" he bellowed.

The yamen runner beside him froze. "Magistrate... this is Jiwang Temple."

"And?" Qin Changqing snapped. "Does that make it immune to law?"

The runner swallowed. Local-born, raised on Jiwang's incense smoke—he would sooner slap his own ancestors than touch that banner.

"M-Magistrate... perhaps we should investigate—"

Qin Changqing kicked him aside.

He grabbed the silk and ripped.

Riiiiip.

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly.

"Well. That answers the question of whether he has sense."

His presence faded.

Qin Changqing wasn't finished.

He overturned sacrificial tables, kicked prayer mats, and shouted like a man determined to offend every deity within earshot.

"Which bastard did this?! If I catch you, I'll chop off your head!"

Then—

A trembling voice rose from the crowd.

"L-Look..."

Everyone looked up.

Rain fell gently.

And from the gray sky descended a colossal figure.

Eight meters tall.

Familiar face.

Unmistakable presence.

Jiwang.

"Jiwang has come!"

"He's enormous!"

"Jiwang—Jiwang!"

The commoners dropped to their knees in unison, as though gravity itself had suddenly remembered them.

Only Qin Changqing remained standing.

Briefly.

Then he fell.

Hard.

The gigantic Jiwang stood before him.

Qin Changqing's mouth opened. Nothing came out.

Jiwang spoke, his voice deep, slow, and crushingly patient:

"Qin Changqing. Do you confess your sins?"

Qin Changqing scrambled backward, terror stripping him of dignity.

"I—I—this official—no—"

"Silence."

Jiwang reached down.

And lifted him.

Just like that.

High above the ground.

Held between two fingers.

The rain kept falling.

And somewhere beyond the clouds, Li Daoxuan thought to himself:

Ancestor Houji... I hope you don't mind. I'm borrowing your face—but the work? That's all mine.

Chapter 558 I'll Call a Friend to Help You All

Li Daoxuan's colossal hand closed around Qin Changqing and lifted him straight up into the air, raising him six or seven meters above the ground as easily as if he were pinching up a bundle of straw.

As the enormous statue moved, Li Daoxuan could clearly feel just how agile and powerful this body was. It was not merely a lump of silicone shaped into human form. Beneath the outer layer was a metal skeleton that provided firm support, ensuring the body neither sagged nor felt soft and rubbery when force was applied. The structure responded smoothly to every command, strong yet precise, and the sensation pleased him greatly.

He did not immediately crush Qin Changqing to death.

Instead, Li Daoxuan carefully controlled his strength, applying just enough pressure to make Qin Changqing feel as though his entire body were being squeezed into a tight ball, bones creaking, breath trapped in his chest, yet stopping short of causing actual injury.

Qin Changqing was so terrified that his mind went completely blank. He could not scream, could not beg, could not even form a single coherent thought. His limbs flailed uselessly in midair, feet kicking at nothing as his life hung in another's grasp.

Below, the people of Jiangzhou erupted.

Cheers, cries, and hoarse shouts surged together like a crashing wave. Many were weeping openly, tears streaming down faces lined with hardship and resentment. Some fell to their knees, others clasped their hands together, trembling with excitement.

How could they not be overwhelmed?

A deity they had worshipped their entire lives had suddenly manifested before their eyes, towering above the city, alive and responsive. To witness such a miracle in one's lifetime was enough to drive any believer into ecstasy.

Li Daoxuan's voice rolled out from above, heavy and solemn.

"Tell me," he asked slowly, "is Qin Changqing a good official?"

The crowd froze.

If anyone else had asked such a question, the answer would have come without hesitation. Of course he was a good official. That was the answer people gave to survive.

But now, the one asking was Jiwang.

The weight of that realization pressed down on them, and for a brief moment, silence hung thick in the air.

Then someone shouted from within the crowd, voice raw with fury, "No! He's not a good official. He's a vile magistrate!"

Another voice immediately followed, louder still. "He took money from the rich and helped them bully honest people!"

More cries burst forth, one after another, as if a dam had finally shattered.

"Steward Zhou forcibly took Old Yang's granddaughter. When Old Yang went to the prefectural yamen to plead for justice, this vile official locked him up instead and tortured him to death!"

"He helped Steward Li seize Zheng's two mu of land!"

"He ruined our lives!"

Years of resentment, fear, and bitterness poured out all at once. These were grievances that had been swallowed in silence, pressed deep into the heart with no hope of redress. Now that Jiwang himself stood before them, presiding over justice, all that pent up anger surged forth like a raging flood.

Li Daoxuan listened quietly, his gaze sweeping across the sea of faces below. He waited, wondering whether even a single person would speak a good word for Qin Changqing.

None did.

Not one.

There were only curses, accusations, and cries of hatred, piling atop one another without end.

At that point, Li Daoxuan understood perfectly what needed to be done.

"Whether this official should die," he declared, "is for you to decide."

As his voice faded, Li Daoxuan slowly lowered Qin Changqing down, placing him directly into the very center of the crowd.

The instant Qin Changqing touched the ground, a sharp sound rang out.

"Ptoeey!"

A glob of saliva landed squarely on his face.

Immediately after, a stone flew in from the side, striking his head with a dull thud. It bounced away and accidentally hit another civilian nearby, who clutched his forehead and yelled in pain, "Stop throwing stones! You're hitting our own people. Just use your fists!"

"That's right," someone else shouted. "Don't hurt yourselves!"

As if given a signal, a group of villagers surged forward and began raining blows upon Qin Changqing with their bare hands. Fists, feet, elbows, and knees fell without mercy.

These were ordinary people, unarmed and unprotected, who had endured the oppression of corrupt officials for years with nothing but silent submission. But now, with the eight meter tall Jiwang standing watch over them, they finally understood what it felt like to have someone powerful backing them.

There was no fear left.

No humiliation.

Only release.

They struck again and again, pouring out every ounce of fury they had been forced to suppress for so long.

Those stuck on the outside grew anxious, jumping in place and shouting, "Let me in. I want to kick him too!"

"Take turns. Don't hog him. Let those of us outside get a few hits as well!"

By now, nearly the entire population of Jiangzhou City had surged toward the entrance of the Jiwang Temple. The narrow intersection was packed to the point of suffocation. People climbed onto walls, crowded onto rooftops, and even trampled through fragile tiles, some losing their footing and crashing down amid startled cries.

In the middle of the chaos, Qin Changqing was beaten until he was no longer recognizable as a human being. Even after the target of their hatred had been reduced to a mangled heap, the crowd did not disperse.

Instead, they formed a wide circle, three layers inside and three layers outside, gazing up at the colossal figure of Jiwang with reverence and awe.

"Thank you, Jiwang!"

"Great beneficence, Jiwang!"

Seeing that the situation had fully stabilized, Li Daoxuan finally moved on to the next step of his plan.

He spoke slowly, his voice echoing across the city like distant thunder. "Rain... has fallen... This year, you may plant your crops..."

The people cried out in unison, "Jiwang protect us. May this year bring a bountiful harvest!"

Jiwang was the god of abundant harvests, after all. In the hearts of the common folk, nothing mattered more than full granaries and full stomachs.

Li Daoxuan continued, "A bountiful harvest alone is not enough. You also need convenient transportation..."

The crowd hesitated slightly, puzzled. Even so, many among them understood this truth on some level. Without roads and waterways, grain could not be moved, wealth could not circulate, and prosperity would remain limited.

Li Daoxuan explained, "Jiwang governs harvests, but not all matters. Therefore, I have invited a friend to help you. His name is Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The common folk had never heard of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Still, since Jiwang himself called this being a friend, that was more than enough. Who needed explanations from a god?

They immediately cried out, "Many thanks, Jiwang!"

Li Daoxuan said, "Dao Xuan Tianzun will help you dredge river channels and guide you toward prosperity. You must cooperate fully."

The people responded without hesitation, "As you command!"

Moments later, the gigantic Jiwang slowly floated upward, rising higher and higher until he vanished into a low hanging cloud. The cloud closed around him, and his form disappeared completely.

Cries of amazement erupted. "Wow. Jiwang has returned to the heavens!"

Then the clouds parted once more.

This time, a much smaller deity emerged, roughly the size of an ordinary person, descending gently from the sky.

Naturally, this was Li Daoxuan releasing another life sized silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The smaller figure dropped down before the crowd with a soft thud. Unlike the previous body, this one had no metal skeleton inside. The silicone was soft and elastic, causing it to bend and twist strangely upon landing, folding into angles no human body could ever manage before bouncing back with a whoosh and finally standing upright.

The people stared, dumbfounded.

The silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun shook out his hands and feet, movements lively and exaggerated, unmistakably alive.

"Heh heh," he chuckled, grinning broadly. "Jiwang sent me to look after you all."

Unsure of what else to do, the people followed custom and called out together, "Many thanks, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun raised an arm and pointed toward the Fen River beside the prefectural city. What had once been a broad waterway now looked little better than a shallow ditch.

"I will widen and deepen this river," he announced, "and restore its former navigational capacity. You should immediately inform the fishermen on the river to come ashore and drag their small wooden boats up as well, so they are not damaged by my spell later."

The crowd hesitated.

They believed deeply in Jiwang, but this newly appeared Dao Xuan Tianzun was still unfamiliar to them. Had they not seen him descend from the sky with their own eyes, some might have suspected trickery.

And yet...

That dramatic descent carried undeniable divine authority. No one dared to disobey.

Fishermen hurriedly steered their small wooden boats toward the riverbanks, while villagers on shore rushed forward to help pull the boats far away from the water's edge.

Before long, not a single vessel remained on that stretch of the Fen River.

Dao Xuan Tianzun climbed up onto the southern city wall and turned to face the narrow river below. Raising both hands high, he called out loudly, "Watch closely, everyone!"

Chapter 559 Little Ma Chao

The people of Jiangzhou didn't leave.

Not one of them.

After the clouds closed and the smaller Dao Xuan Tianzun descended, no one thought of going home to cook, to work, or even to breathe properly. They simply stood there—packed shoulder to shoulder along

the city walls, crouched on rooftops, balanced on broken tiles—eyes wide, necks craned, afraid that blinking might cause the miracle to vanish.

They had just watched a god beat a magistrate into something that barely resembled a human being.

No one wanted to miss the sequel.

The drizzle continued, light and persistent, misting the widened Fen River. The river itself seemed confused, like it had gone to bed a narrow stream and woken up promoted to something much more important.

Then—

Something descended from the clouds.

A shovel.

Not a metaphorical shovel.

Not a poetic one.

A very real, very large shovel, gleaming faintly through the rain.

It plunged into the river.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

The water roiled, mud boiled up from below, and the riverbanks visibly retreated.

The people of Jiangzhou collectively forgot how to use indoor voices.

"Wow—!"

"The Fen River—look at it!"

"It's wider!"

"And deeper!"

"Heavens above—this is divine power?!"

Someone squinted hard, then frowned.

"...Wait. Why is the god digging with a shovel?"

That question immediately earned him a slap on the back of the head.

"Are you stupid?" another villager hissed. "If he blasted it open with a spell, where would we go? Straight to the underworld!"

"That's right," a third chimed in solemnly, arms crossed like an expert. "Digging carefully is mercy. You think gods don't care about collateral damage?"

A fisherman wiped rain off his face and nodded fervently. "Exactly. If the river explodes, my boat explodes too."

Someone else whispered, awed, "This Dao Xuan Tianzun... his strength is no less than Jiwang's."

"Well, obviously," came the reply. "Would Jiwang introduce just anyone as a friend?"

The shovel continued its work.

Mud flew.

Water surged.

The river groaned and reshaped itself under force that was neither violent nor gentle—but deliberate.

By the time the shovel finally withdrew, the Fen River had doubled in width, stretching forty to fifty meters across. The water ran thick and murky now, ugly as sin—but everyone there knew rivers healed with time.

Ugly water meant deep water.

Deep water meant ships.

The golden hand vanished back into the clouds.

The small Dao Xuan Tianzun, standing atop the southern city wall, rose slowly into the air. Rain slid off his smooth silicone body, pattering softly to the stones below.

His voice rolled out, calm and unhurried.

"Wait a few days. Large ships will arrive from downstream."

The people didn't cheer this time.

They stared.

Because this wasn't a promise for tomorrow—it was a promise for a future they'd never dared imagine.

Then Dao Xuan Tianzun ascended.

The clouds closed.

The drizzle remained.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Someone finally looked down.

The river was wider.

The city was still standing.

Qin Changqing lay crumpled near the temple steps, his face swollen beyond recognition, breathing shallowly, emitting noises that suggested regret had arrived late but violently.

This was not a dream.

It had happened.

Someone laughed.

Someone cried.

Someone dropped to their knees again, just in case.

And then Jiangzhou erupted.

Puxian.

The air there tasted nothing like rain and miracles.

It tasted like fear.

Zijing Liang stood outside the ruined county town, staring at the shapeless mess of broken walls and earthen barricades that passed for Puxian's defenses.

They should have fallen days ago.

Yet they hadn't.

"Our men pulled back again?" he asked quietly.

Chuǎng Wang, Gao Yingxiang, stepped up beside him and sighed. "Again."

"They won't break," Chuǎng Wang continued, rubbing his temples. "The government soldiers inside fight like madmen. No fear. No hesitation. Every time our people charge, morale collapses."

Zijing Liang didn't answer.

His eyes were fixed on a figure standing amid the rubble.

Silver armor.

White horse.

A straight-backed silhouette that refused to bend.

"Little Ma Chao," Zijing Liang spat. "Ma Xianglin."

Inside Puxian, Ma Xianglin was frowning as well.

Rain streaked down his silver armor, soaking the white plume of his helmet. One eye burned with exhaustion; the other, long blind, stared unblinking toward the rebel camp.

He had been called many things.

Zhao Zilong.

Little Ma Chao.

One-Eyed Ma.

All of them meant the same thing: a man who refused to die quietly.

Beside him stood Zhang Fengyi, armor dark with rain, posture unyielding.

"Any news?" Ma Xianglin asked.

She shook her head. "None. Scouts can't break through. We're sealed in."

Ma Xianglin exhaled slowly.

Defending a city without walls was like defending a corpse that refused to lie down. Every hour cost blood. Every night drained strength.

"The reinforcements will come," he said, more to himself than to her. "They have to."

Then—

A shout rang out from the tower.

"Movement to the east!"

Ma Xianglin and Zhang Fengyi climbed, boots slipping on wet stone.

Through the rain, they saw it: tens of thousands of rebels peeling away, surging eastward.

And beyond them—

A much smaller force.

Only a few thousand.

Ma Xianglin's jaw tightened. "Too few..."

Before the thought could finish—

Thunder cracked.

Not from the sky.

From the ground.

A wall of gunfire tore through the rain.

Bangbangbangbang—

The rebels' roar shattered into screams.

Men turned and ran.

Chaos rippled backward like a broken wave.

Ma Xianglin stared.

Then smiled.

Just a little.

Rain or not, something had finally gone very, very wrong for the wrong side.

Chapter 560 Brains Filled with Brawn

The rebel army didn't retreat so much as fall apart.

It wasn't a clean withdrawal.

It wasn't a tactical repositioning.

It was men tripping over mud, over corpses, over their own courage as it ran away faster than their legs could keep up.

From the ruins of Puxian, Ma Xianglin watched it happen—and for once, the famous One-Eyed Ma didn't immediately understand what he was seeing.

"They... broke?" he said slowly.

Beside him, Zhang Fengyi said nothing—but the look she gave him answered clearly enough.

How is this even possible?

That musket fire just now—

Too dense.

Too coordinated.

Too damn confident.

It had sounded less like a volley and more like someone tearing open the sky and dumping thunder straight onto the battlefield.

Ma Xianglin frowned, rain dripping off the edge of his helmet. "Since when does the court have a firearm unit like that in Shanxi?"

He didn't remember hearing about it.

More importantly—he didn't remember anyone being stupid enough to use muskets like that in heavy rain, in open ground, with no cover.

He turned sharply and looked at one of his own musketeers, a veteran gripping a Three-Eyed Arquebus.

The soldier met his gaze.

Then... awkwardly shook his head.

Ma Xianglin snorted. "Forget it."

He straightened, his voice snapping back into command. "I don't care who they are. If they're driving the rebels back, they're friends today."

He raised his spear.

"Prepare to counter-charge. We're linking up with them."

"Yes, sir!"

The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers moved as one.

These weren't conscripts scraped together from hungry villages. These were veterans—men raised on mountain paths and cliff edges, trained to kill where footing was a luxury.

Their signature weapon—the white pole—came up in practiced grips.

White waxwood shafts, pale as bone.

Hooked spearheads that could stab, drag, or rip a man off his horse.

Iron rings at the butt ends that turned every miss into a second strike.

When needed, those hooks and rings could even link together—forming makeshift ladders to scale cliffs.

This was an army built for bad terrain and worse odds.

Ma Xianglin swung onto his white horse, rain streaking across his silver armor. The contrast made him look almost unreal—like something that had stepped out of a story rather than history.

He glanced at Zhang Fengyi. "You take command."

She stared. "You're dumping command on me again?"

He laughed loudly, bright and careless. "Commanding is troublesome. Doesn't suit me."

Then, grinning, he added, "I don't want to command."

And with that, he kicked his horse forward and charged out of Puxian first.

Zhang Fengyi watched his back for half a breath, then shook her head. "White Pole Soldiers!"

"Yes!"

"Follow your general!"

Two thousand white poles surged forward, their formation breaking into a killing wave as they poured out of the ruined city.

On the other side of the battlefield, Cheng Xu was having a very different day.

Rebel troops were collapsing in front of him—not because of bravery, not because of heroic charges, but because bullets were very rude and refused to negotiate.

Teams armed with Chassepot rifles had already fanned out, moving in small, flexible units. They fired, repositioned, fired again—methodical, ugly, effective.

Meanwhile, closer in, the rifled musketeers were... struggling.

Broad-brimmed bamboo hats tilted low. Waterproof covers clung awkwardly to musket stocks. Reloading in the rain was a test of patience, faith, and hand dexterity.

One soldier muttered while tamping powder. "Instructor He... when can we all switch to Chassepot rifles?"

Cheng Xu didn't answer.

He wasn't even listening.

His eyes scanned the battlefield, searching—again—for a familiar figure.

He didn't see Grandma.

And that absence sat wrong in his chest.

Lao Nanfeng, on the other hand, was in an excellent mood.

"Hahaha! Good weapons are for veterans!" he said cheerfully. "You brats focus on not blowing your own fingers off first."

A recruit grumbled, "So new soldiers just exist to be bullied?"

"Yes," Lao Nanfeng replied instantly. "Correct."

The soldier protested, "They've fired four rounds! I've barely loaded my second!"

Lao Nanfeng snorted. "When I joined, I got bullied for fun."

Everyone went quiet.

Then Lao Nanfeng continued lightly, "Besides—even with a Chassepot, you'd still get bullied. There's always someone higher. Otherwise, why would anyone want to be emperor?"

He paused, then laughed. "And even emperors get bullied by the Manchus."

Silence again.

He casually snapped a cartridge into his Chassepot, lifted it, fired once—boom—and didn't even bother checking where it landed.

Reloaded.

"Listen carefully," he said, still not looking forward. "In battle, don't whine about fairness or equipment. Whatever's in your hands—that's your lifeline. Believe in it, squeeze everything out of it, or die wondering why."

Boom.

Another shot.

Still without looking.

The recruits felt cold sweat crawl down their backs.

Is he just wasting bullets?

Then Lao Nanfeng stopped talking.

"Oh?"

He tilted his head. "The court general's out."

He hadn't turned.

Yet he'd seen everything.

The recruits snapped their gazes forward.

Through the rain—there he was.

A white horse.

Silver armor.

One eye patched, the other burning.

Ma Xianglin.

His white pole spear moved like a living thing, hooking, thrusting, smashing. Rebels fell in every direction, knocked flat before they even understood what had hit them.

Lao Nanfeng clicked his tongue. "Tsk. I was wondering."

He smiled. "So it's Ma Xianglin. The Little Ma Chao from Shizhu."

A soldier asked, awed, "General, you know him?"

Lao Nanfeng shook his head. "Nope."

Then added, "But that style? Instantly recognizable."

He chuckled. "These days, generals who charge first are rare. There's He Renlong the Madman. Ma Xianglin the Little Ma Chao. And our Chengcheng County patrol inspector—Fang Wushang."

He laughed. "That's about it."

At that moment, Cheng Xu finally spoke, eyes still searching. "That kind of fighting is unacceptable."

Everyone blinked.

"If the general charges himself," Cheng Xu continued calmly, "who commands? If he dies or gets wounded, the entire army collapses. That's irresponsible—to himself and to everyone else."

The soldiers exchanged looks.

Instructor He is scared again, they thought.

Lao Nanfeng finished loading—but didn't fire.

He rested the rifle, then shouted across the battlefield, voice cutting through rain and gunfire alike:

"Ma Xianglin!"

"You muscle-brained idiot!"

"Get the hell out of our firing lanes!"

"If you get shot by friendly fire, is that your fault—or ours?!"

The rain kept falling.

But someone, somewhere, was finally learning that bravery without brains was just another way to die fast.